

Larkie . . .

By MARY H. STAEGE

One morning early in June of 1958 a friend brought us a tiny orphaned meadowlark. She had had no experience with birds and did not know what to do with the helpless, unlovely creature. Knowing of my interest in birds and of my various experiences with them she hoped I might relieve her of this responsibility.

The neighbor who gave the bird to her had found it in the field with no trace of the mother or other nestlings around. She could not keep the lark because she had an unfriendly dog and a cat with hungry kittens. I realized that the rearing of a baby bird would be a time consuming job, but to refuse to take it would put my friend in a difficult situation. So Larkie was adopted into the family of two "bachelor girls" and their German Shepherd, Duna.

Since Larkie could neither fly nor feed himself he was very dependent upon us. He soon learned my voice as that of his foster mother. As soon as he heard me in the morning he would say "peep" and immediately I would take him up and feed him. He was never fed during the night but he thrived, never-the-less, and was never sick.

His first food consisted of bread moistened with milk, also cottage cheese and banana. A little later, berries and other fruit, cooked vegetables and dog meal were added to his diet. I had to force feed him as he did not know how to eat. Even after he was able to feed himself he wanted me to stand by and give him his food bit by bit. But when we gave Duna her serving of dog meal Larkie would run to the dish, hop in and help herself. Duna would back away, whining softly or giving one sharp bark to indicate her displeasure.

Larkie's bed was a box of dry grass or pine needles with a thin wool coverlet draped over it. On sunny days we would put him out of doors for a short time in his covered box. One day while I was away he hopped out and became lost. My sister could not find him and it was nearly dark when I came home, so rescue then was hopeless. Early the next morning Duna and I started out to look for him. It seemed useless, so I finally went to work in the garden while Duna continued the search. In a few minutes I heard an exultant "woof" and looking up I saw Duna sitting in the tall timothy not far from the garden. As I went to her she put her nose down in the grass, and there sat Larkie.

Larkie was never caged or deprived of his freedom. He had the run of the house, and run it was, on our part as well as his. With plastic covers and towels in the more vulnerable areas, and with the assistance of Duna, we did get some time for household duties.

After Larkie had been with us for a while we began taking him out of doors daily with Duna as birdie-sitter, under our supervision. From puppy days she had been taught to be kind to birds.

Larkie had a favorite place in the wildflower garden where he entertained himself by pulling on the stems of plants and flowers until he

fell over. He would hop up, run in circles and occasionally rush at Duna, giving her a peck on her persuasive nose. She did not retaliate, but dutifully minded her charge. When Larkie strayed too far away she carefully rounded him up and herded him back to safety. In the flower garden Larkie liked to probe the earth for worms or insects. When he saw a bird or an airplane fly over he would stretch up to full height, head on one side scanning the heavens, or crouch to the ground, making a quick dive for cover. It was not unusual for Duna to look after Larkie when he was out of doors. She would lie down near him as he searched for insects. When he moved to another place she would follow him in her protective role. One day Larkie was in the rose garden near the house when a squirrel appeared on the scene and frightened him. Half running, half flying, he went to Duna for protection.

Larkie loved to be with us but was afraid of strangers. When two friends came to see him he was frightened and disappeared into a thicket. I told Duna to find him, then realized that only the day before she had killed a pine snake in that very place, and that she might hurt Larkie, thinking he was another snake. In desperation I tried to call her off, but she already had him in her mouth and was carrying him out to the lawn where she deposited him without injury. Had she been a retriever it would be conceivable, but for a police dog, bred for the offensive, it was past understanding.

At the corner of the house there was a puddle of water left by a sudden shower. We noticed Larkie taking advantage of it, so we supplied him with a "bathtub" which he used regularly. When in the house the urge to bathe possessed him, he ran to the little bathroom off the kitchen and utilized Duna's drinking dish. One day his desire for a bath nearly ended in tragedy. I heard a vigorous fluttering and splashing in the bathroom and rushed in to find Larkie in the toilet. He was quickly rescued, unharmed. After bathing he would shake himself and go on the hop, skip and run to his box where he cuddled down to dry off.

Larkie liked to play as well as a little kitten, and in much the same manner. He would seize a piece of crumpled tissue with his claws and lie on his side kicking it and tossing it up. A sheet of folded newspaper was another source of amusement for him. He would boost it up to form a canopy where he would sit looking out at us. Often he would hop up on my sister's bed and cuddle up to her face or under her arm where he would sit contentedly. At other times he would have a regular tug-of-war with anything at hand, kicking and skipping until he occasionally rolled off onto the floor. If the door of my sister's room was closed and he wanted to get in he would patiently stand beside it, waiting for it to be opened.

As I lay down to take a nap one afternoon Larkie hopped onto the bed and began to pick me. I put him off repeatedly, but he immediately returned. Finally he cuddled up close to my face and I began to relax. Just as I started to doze, a sharp stab in my ear resulted in Larkie finding himself at the foot of the bed. In less time than it takes to tell it he was back again, ready for another onslaught. This time it was in my nose. Once he crawled into a sweater pocket where he was unable to turn around or get out, and had to be forcibly extricated.

Nothing escaped Larkie's attention. One morning I picked some marigolds and placed them in a bowl on the dining room table. A few minutes later I returned to the room to find my carefully arranged flowers scattered all over the table and Larkie busily dissecting the heads.

Larkie seemed to enjoy being with me. He would perch on my hand as I carried him around the yard and down the road for walks. I was reminded of my sister's words when he first came to us. She said she doubted that a meadowlark could ever be tamed as young robins are, but Larkie demonstrated that he could not only be tamed but could become an affectionate and lovable pet.

Larkie early became quite an accomplished singer. We could scarcely believe it the first time we heard him imitating the birds outside. One could easily recognize the song of the indigo bunting, goldfinch, wren and catbird in his repertoire. He sang nearly every day, usually standing in the window, but often he sang while sitting or playing. Sometimes he would run around the kitchen singing while I was preparing breakfast. After the birds outside stopped singing he no longer imitated them but had a sweet little song all his own, very unlike the usual song of the meadowlark. During the latter part of his stay with us he sang a great deal. He would stand on a chairback or even on our hand or head and sing. Once we discovered him standing on a chair before the radio singing in harmony with the music. When that stopped he flew to another room; then as the program continued he again took his place before the radio and joined in as before. He always sang with his bill closed. During this period he began giving the typical call of the adult of his species.

On the 8th of July Larkie made his first flight. It was a short flight and he soon returned to continue his search for grasshoppers and other insects. Whether in the house or out of doors, when I put my hand down and said "hop on" he would step up on my hand and "ride."

Larkie's ability to protect himself as might be necessary in the wild state was amusingly demonstrated in one of his playful moods. One day as I was washing the floor he rushed up to me, gripped the flesh of my forearm with his powerful beak and followed the motion of my arm, "singing" all the while with his beak closed, as usual. He hung on so tenaciously that I repeatedly lifted him off the floor without his once letting go. This was apparently more fun for him than for me. His sword-like beak could be used as a formidable weapon upon occasion.

The 18th of September was a memorable day, for Larkie was banded. And fortunate it was, because the next morning he took his departure. Workmen were here that day, and the pounding and other strange noises terrified him. When I took him out of doors he flew across the road to a little wooded swamp beyond an open field. Duna and I searched in vain for him and nally had to give up. The next day as I walked down to the mailbox with Duna I said "Can't you find Larkie?" Coming back I noticed she was tracking something in the clover field where I had often taken Larkie to hunt grasshoppers. Then, to my amazement and great joy I saw Larkie standing straight and tall—the sun shining on his golden breast—and with a song in my heart I went to him, put my hand down and said "hop on" and he stepped up on my hand and was carried to the house.

As Larkie was feeding on the lawn one morning he suddenly flew across the road and was lost in a growth of small trees and shrubs. A storm was approaching and we were concerned for his safety. Not finding him, we returned to the house in the rain. A little later I started out again with Duna. She ran on ahead and as I rounded the big cedar tree at the corner of the yard she lay with forepaws outstretched, facing Larkie, her expression telling me the lost was found. As usual, Larkie stepped up on my outstretched hand and accompanied us to the house.

On October 8th as Larkie was hunting insects at the edge of the garden he suddenly took flight, soaring above the treetops and across the fields. Then he came down to the very place from which he had taken off. This was the longest flight he had made, but it was followed by many others. The next morning there were three meadowlarks in an elm tree beside the garage. Larkie, standing in an open window, heard them singing. Soon afterward we heard him singing the typical meadowlark song for the first time. Until we heard this, and his previous call note, we thought he might be a Western meadowlark because they are heard in this locality every spring, sometimes before the Eastern lark arrives. My first experience with the former was a mystery. It sounded like a wood thrush but its song came from the field or the top of a telephone pole. Not until I later saw and heard them in California did I discover the real source of the song. Now they are quite common here and nest in our fields.

An article in a nature magazine some years ago stated that experiments with hand-raised larks would indicate that their song is learned, rather than inherited. This would seem to be true in Larkie's case.

After hearing the three meadowlarks our Larkie seemed more restless, flying from room to room, and when out of doors would make several flights a day but he always came back promptly.

On the morning of October 17th he seemed to feel an urgent desire to get out of doors, as though instinct told him it was time to be on the way south. He flew excitedly about the house, giving his characteristic call of two or three notes followed by a string of notes in rapid succession. He also uttered some harsh, scolding kind of notes in marked contrast to his usual sweet warble. When I took him outside he began hunting insects on the lawn, then made a short flight and returned. A little later I saw him winging his way to the southwest until he was lost to view.

Larkie had been so happy and contented with us here that his sudden departure is understandable only in the light of his migrating instinct. We are hoping that this natural impulse would bring him back to us with the coming of spring.

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Yes, bringing up Larkie had taken much time, work and patience but it was a rewarding experience. His songs and his endearing ways repaid us for all our effort and brought us joy and satisfaction.

